

The Role of Social Media Platforms in Political Protests in Iran  
During 2009 and 2017-9 Events

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## Abstract

This research project examines the role of social media in political activism with a particular focus on the unfolding events of protests in Iran during the years 2009 and 2017 to 2019. Social media platforms provide tools for people to gather, document, and publish information in the online sphere. Also, these tools provide an opportunity to connect millions of users together so that they can share their thoughts and experiences. Social media has the power to help people in organizing protests to challenge the established governments. In Iran in 2009, a series of political unrest happened following the presidential election in that year. Twitter and Facebook played a significant role in uniting people to document the events and share them with the Western media. During the years 2017-9, the Iranian protestors used social media platforms such as Telegram and Instagram to share information for the internal audience inside the country. The Iranian government's response to these two major social media political activism was different because nature and the intended audiences were different. In 2009, the regime's responses were mostly gatekeeping and disinformation campaigns. In 2017-9 events, policing and military measures such as arresting activists and shutting down telecommunication services were more prominent.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research project to Neda Agha-Soltan whose death in 2009 sparked the voice of freedom in Iran. I would also like to dedicate this paper to the Iranian people whose courageous fight for freedom and a better life is still going on. It is my wish to help to foster their great movement by projecting their voice and their message of hope through my work at the University of Saskatchewan.

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## Introduction

Social media platforms are connecting millions of users around the globe and allowing them to create and share information. The related objects of study in this paper are social media and participatory media, where users can have interactions and influences. Social media platforms are those websites and applications that allow users to share content quickly and in real-time (Hudson), and participatory media is media in which the audience plays an active role in creation, publication, and dissemination of information (*Participatory Media - Wikipedia*). The word “platform” here refers to any tools that can provide an opportunity to users to project their voice, express their thoughts, and disseminate information, analogous to traditional auditorium stages which offer a platform for similar purposes. A social media platform can be classified as a participatory media tool as well. For example, in applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, users can create value and content and publish it in these applications, and they can reach a number of audiences that they can interact with around a topic of common interest.

In this paper, it is argued that people can influence politics and have an active role in bringing political changes by using social media platforms. Computer technology, participatory media, and social media have the power to gather people together and give them the ability to share information around a political topic so that they can organize protests in response to events.

To accurately show the power of social media in context, the focus is on social media activism in Iran during two periods: the 2009 post-election events, and the series of uprisings from 2017 to 2019. These two timeframes share a similarities in uniting the Iranian protestors and the use of social media in documenting and sharing information. However, they are different in terms of the



intended audience, the complexity of social media use, the number and demography of participants and the Iranian regime's response to the uprisings.

This paper has three major parts. The first part is an introduction to the role of computer technology and ICT, as a whole, in politics and the contributions it has had to the field of politics. Most notably, computer technology has made access to information more possible for people and politicians. For example, a user can search for legal and political documents online, permitting if the state has made them available online because such procedures can provide a digital interaction between citizens and the government to facilitate ease of communication.

The second part of the paper focuses mainly on the role of participatory social media platforms and their role in politics. This part is based on the definition of participatory media, and what constitutes such platforms. The second section discusses the features and tools that participatory media provide to influence and change the realm of politics. For instance, these platforms can be a tool in the hands of the public to easily create and transmit a political message to their peers without the influence of the governments and mainstream media agencies. The constant battle between social media users and state media hegemony to control the narrative of events is something that is taken to social media applications now, and this new medium has become the setting for documenting and sharing such information.

The third part is a case study of the use of social media in Iran's political protests and how social media was influential in the series of events in 2009 post-election and the uprisings of 2017 to 2019.

### **Has technology changed political activism?**

Technology has advanced at high speed in the past few years. Electronic devices are widely accessible, and almost every one of them connects to the Internet in some ways. Mobile phones

could be an interesting example in this political context because they have played an important role now that smartphone ownership is on the rise and has become a prominent device for social media and communication activities for millions around the globe (Wei). They are not just a device to receive calls or send text messages, but they can bring political change and revolutions, because “the availability of cellphones as a communication technology allows political groups to overcome collective action problems more easily and improve in-group cooperation, and coordination” (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2007). Smartphones take the notion of connectivity to networks to a new level because they are able to connect more people by using the Internet and Internet-based applications like social media platforms.

When participatory media finds its way into politics, it can cause significant changes, such as bringing down a government or start a global movement. The recent political history of the world shows many examples of such activities. The Arab Spring, for example, was a series of prodemocracy protests and activities in several Muslim countries, such as Syria, Libya, and Egypt, where the people used social media tools to document and organize protests and bring down their dictators. Their efforts created a massive pool of data using relevant hashtags that linked millions of posts together for collective activism and networks of online interactions between different groups of people (History.com editors; Bruns et al.). The Iranian 2009 post-election protests are another example where the nation used social media applications such as Twitter to perform the same roles in sharing and documenting the series of events (PEJ New Media Index). In a recent example in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement was initiated by outraged Facebook posts about the death of Georg Floyd and police brutality that sparked actions and protests in the streets to seek justice against racial discrimination (Maqbool). The #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM hashtags functioned as an ideological and political intervention affirming black people’s value to

society and humanity, and showing their resilience in face of oppression (Hobson 23). These examples of the role of social media in creating political movements and prompting citizens' participation show the effectiveness of social media to create powerful political discourses and to induce real-world changes.

Social media platforms operate on the infrastructures of the Internet. The Internet has been embedded in our lives to the extent that many governments have set policies to embrace or condemn it. The emergence of computer technologies and communication tools such as the Internet has created new terms like *e-democracy* and *e-governments* to show the relationship of electronic tools and real-life facilities and establishments. *Electronic government* refers to providing government services by means of ICT, allowing traditional ways of administration to move to internet-based delivery of government information and business to citizens (Kardan and Sadeghiani 467). Next, *electronic democracy* is the social and political collective participation of governments and citizens to express thoughts, identities, and information via tools such as social media platforms to create a new way of citizen participation and engagement in the policy and lawmaking processes (Kreiss). These definitions are particularly applicable to Iran's case as the country has a high Internet penetration rate, a high number of computer users, and a high rate of mobile phone ownership, which are the gates of access to information and political activism.

Access to mobile phones (especially Smartphones) is a critical topic in this study because they are the most widely used devices in the hands of the public with access to the Internet and social media applications. The study of mobile phone ownership rates and the demography of mobile phone users gives a clearer picture of where these users are coming from and what their characteristics are. Mobile phones have spread around the world rapidly. It is estimated that more than 5 billion people have mobile devices, with smartphones holding more than half of this market

(Silver and Taylor n.p.). The Pew Research Centre report on the penetration rate of mobile phones states that: “whether in advanced or emerging economies, younger people, those with higher levels of education and those with higher incomes are more likely to be digitally connected,” and also, “younger people...are much more likely to have smartphones, access the Internet and use social media.” In addition to the Pew’s report, the Iranian Students’ Polling Agency (ISPA) conducted a survey showing more than 63 percent of the country’s population over the age 18 are active social media users (“How Much Time Iranians Spend on Social Media”). Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of the population behind social media activism is from a young age group.

In addition to mobile device ownership, the Internet use rate is revealing as well. The Pew Research Centre, in their 2019 survey, found that Internet use is almost universal in developed countries like the United States, Australia, and South Korea. Moreover, more than half of the population in emerging economies have used the Internet. The authors of the report have narrowed down the definition of Internet users to those who “ever use social media sites like Facebook or Twitter – even if they said they did not own a smartphone or use the internet”; they define internet users “as anyone who uses social media or owns a smartphone, even if they report not using the internet.” This definition of Internet users will be applied in this paper to the Iranians who actively participated in any of the online political practices because they have an active role in organizing protests and documenting the events online for content sharing.

In addition to civilians and ordinary people on social media, the politicians, heads of states, and whoever possesses the power to rule over certain people are part of the demography of technology users as well. For example, political figures such as US president Donald Trump and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani use social media accounts. In their social media presence, they can convey political messages, and the public can engage in political debates with them, especially

in those social media applications that provide commenting features. This two-way model of communication is important because such activities can create a dialogue about a political issue, which in turn can influence the politics of a country at upper levels.

A notable example of these exchanges is the incident in which Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, and Christine Pelosi, the daughter of Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of House of Commons, entered into an online Twitter debate about Holocaust and the Jewish new year.



Figure 1: the Twitter debate between Javad Zarif and Christine Pelosi (Zarif)

Javad Zarif, who assumed office in 2013, is here engaging in a political/cultural exchange with an activist figure from the United States (Rayman), and explaining a subtle change in Iran's politics and approach to anti-Semitism practices in contrast with the previous office holder, President Ahmadinejad. The Internet is full of these examples, which shows the importance of social media platforms as a communication tool enabling politicians and civilians to influence politics and cultures by creating an engaging debate over a shared topic of interest.

Politicians and the general public are influencing each other more than ever in modern times due to their active participation, negotiation, and communication in the online sphere. It is essential, then, to see how politics has been affected by this new tool because "we are citizens, but we are

also subjects [of the state]... We have a right to participate, but we also have responsibilities for maintaining the political system” (Qvortrup 58). It is through active participation of subjects and citizens in the online domain, like Christine Pelosi’s debate with Minister Zarif, that people can create a movement to demand their political rights and fight for freedom. These types of collective activities on the Internet can make e-democracy a reality, with ICT measures being used for an active role of people in policy and decision making in their political affairs.

Participation is the key concept here. In democratic and free countries, the populace of a nation has the ability to assert their political views and beliefs through different channels, let it be voting or peaceful protesting. On the other hand, in less democratic countries or even in dictatorships, though citizens’ political activities are forbidden or allowed only within the rules of the regime, the new generation and the general public find ways in which to make their voices heard. For example, The Arab Spring movement started from the viral circulation of the images and videos of Mohammed Bouazizi setting himself on fire, which in turn created a revolutionary discourse on social media platforms leading to protests pouring onto the streets. These events crippled some Arab countries like Tunisia, and started a civil war in case of Syria (Howard et al.). The semiotic processes of such pictures and videos have significant emotional, political, or cultural impacts. These values of meaning are being shared more rapidly and efficiently in social media platforms nowadays, and users can access this information better than, for example, in the era of print media domination. The “power of online participatory platforms should be understood as the governance of semiotic open-endedness”. Therefore, the concept of participation in social media “should be revisited to pay attention to the networked conditions that enable it,” which means the focus should be on topics such as “cultural practices that make the production and circulation of meaning possible” (Langlois 91), as Mohammad Bouazizi’s pictures created an online turmoil

because they became upsetting images of the inaptness of the Arab governments. These images and videos can feed the online participation of the users, they help create an initial discourse in the online sphere, and they have the power to move activity expressing political grievances to the next level, such as protests on the streets.

The growing number of politically active youth and young adults shows that politics is moving from the traditional manner of representation in places like the House of Commons or the parliaments to the streets where people demand their rights and wants. When participation of the people coupled with technology finds its way onto the streets, these significant movements can attract worldwide attention and bring about changes, negative or positive. For example, the unprecedented revolution organized by the youth (and the rest of the nation, later on) in the Middle Eastern countries led to overthrowing dictators like Hosni Mubarak as part of the Arab Spring movement. This push from the public is a statement of the changing effects of people and technology on politics where ideology, people, and technology could be the winner for once (Blakemore).

In addition to participation, the roles of new media (specifically social media), the Internet, and television are essential in political changes. The real potential of these new media is the power of quantities: the large number of networks and connections of people in an online domain. In fact, social media's real power is in supporting civil societies and the public sphere, which will produce change over time (Shirky) because such online platforms can connect a large number of people together for active mutual communication. In traditional print media such as newspapers, for example, there was hardly any participation from the public, and they were mainly consumers of the distributed information.

The scope and number of the audience and how people can interact with one another or with the producer of information is the main difference between traditional print media and the new media. For instance, the student uprising of July 1999 in Iran following a new parliamentary bill curbing press freedom and the banning of a major reformist newspaper, *Salam*, mostly involved Tehran University's students (*BBC News | MIDDLE EAST | Six Days That Shook Iran*). This news did not reach other cities, unlike protests of the 2009 post-presidential election and onwards, because there was hardly any social media presence or Internet penetration rate at that time in Iran. In 2009, the protesters could benefit from communication tools like the Internet and social media that were more accessible and widespread to have political influence. New media gave the power to the people to create a dialogue around political subjects and participate in the political realm. This two-way feature of communication, along with the speed of sharing information, are integral features of new media that give the ability to people to induce political change.

Communication and access to information are the main features that technology has brought to modern politics. Communication is the core of politics and political participation because politics “can be seen in terms of communication concerned with influencing public opinion” (De Landtcheer et al. 126). New media, now, works as a mediator between the politicians and the public. The political activities of the two resonate between two models of bottom-up and top-down systems in politics where the first one is emergent movements from the public, or on the streets, to bring change to the state (Stone and Squires n.p.) and the latter is when the institutionalized power forces a prescribed form of government onto its subjects, as seen mostly in forms of control-from-above in totalitarian regimes (Periwal n.p.). With the rise of social movements around the world, new media and social media are helping the bottom-up political activism because citizens' participation keeps political systems balanced by legitimizing or condemning the actions of



political leaders through citizen support, or lack of it (Barber n.p.). Moreover, since political participation is information-seeking, the Internet and social media platforms that can serve this purpose have a prime effect on the trends and directions of politics.

De Landtsheer et al. provide four dimensions of how computer technology and social media have changed modern politics for good.

First, next to the mass communicative features of technology, there comes information and stored knowledge. The Internet and everything that comes with it is a giant web of computers and users creating, publishing, distributing, and storing knowledge. Any kind of political document could be made instantly available. In Iran's case, for example, major political offices have websites that are accessible in different languages with detailed information about that office. The Iranian president's website (<http://president.ir>) is a place where information about both the office and the current holder of it, along with related news items, can be found. Such stored knowledge increases e-political knowledge and awareness about political issues at hand.

Active political discussions within community connections is the second dimension. Civic networks bring political issues that the community is concerned about, and citizens can benefit from online/offline collective public discussions. The Internet has made it possible for the politicians and the public to engage in dialogues with each other and amongst themselves. Twitter is a prime example of an application with such features.

The third dimension, and an important one, is the matter of voting. The Internet helps in attracting the public's attention and casts a broader net to connect candidates and political parties to their audiences. Traditional media (TV and print media) are partisan-based and also fail to provide all the necessary information due to their distribution limitations. In contrast, the Internet

and social media compensate for those deficits by providing new tools for broadcasting a political message and participating in political activities.

The fourth dimension is the political activities of the public for which the Internet has provided many opportunities. For social movements, the Internet is “increasingly useful for overcoming the problem of collective action” because it provides a direct and interactive channel of communication where “citizens can tell their representatives their demands and needs at length.” If the communication between the citizens and the local representatives fails, then social media has the power to aid the people in forming political activities to protest, which can be an extreme case of political action. To provide an example, Twitter was banned in Iran in 2009 when the regime realized its role in documenting the protests. However, the protestors used tools such as Virtual Private Network (VPNs) to mask their Internet Protocol (IP) addresses to provide access to restricted websites with greater privacy and security. Such practices to access social media tools in order to engage in political discussions can “fuel activist protest and sustain revolution” (Wojcieszak and Smith 105) because even by trying to circumvent the ban on Twitter, the Iranian social media user is showing an act of revolt and political rebellion.

De Landsheer et al. have provided a detailed framework of how the Internet has changed our political spheres. However, governments in power and traditional media still have a significant role in the process as well, to the point that they can hinder the social movements of their citizens. Regarding access to information, it is the politicians and governments that have to provide the required political information in an appropriate form for their citizens (Barber et al.). Alternatively, if they obstruct the stream of information by such means as censorship, they deny their citizens the vital basis of political participation: knowledge and information, as in Iran’s attempt to curb the voice of the revolution in 2009.

Moreover, mainstream media, such as television and print media, can divert and alter the narrative of political events through the means of gatekeeping the information. The mainstream press decides what events become news or points of focus. Therefore, they are in a constant battle with other channels of information such as social media platforms that provide almost unlimited access to information. When social media undermines “the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes” (Williams and Delli Carpini 61) the citizens can find alternative ways to access that information because it is more difficult to practice gatekeeping of information when it is produced and distributed in massive quantities.

A recent example of gatekeeping practices in Iran was when Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, held a press conference on Journalists’ Day in 2019 but failed to invite international press correspondents to the event, thereby limiting international media presence in Iran. Such actions are further supported by a ban from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that has stopped issuing permits to journalists from foreign media (Rezaian). In contrast, social media enabled the rise of citizen journalists who are documenting events inside of Iran, and the western media can access this pool of information for their journalistic practices now. The presence of social media in times of conflicts such as the protests in 2009 allows for circumventing the gatekeeping of the Iranian regime and its state media.

The Internet did not have the necessary means to support social media applications in the early years of its existence. It is important to know how the Internet technology has evolved to provide the infrastructures to host social media platforms. The invention of Web 2.0 technology paved the way for the emergence of social media platforms and a participatory mode of interaction and communication in the online sphere. Web 2.0 is a series of tools, computing solutions, and protocols that makes it easier to create online applications that are dynamic and are highly social

allowing the users to manipulate and interact with content and data (Wolcott), which in turn allows for a participatory and interactivity culture for the users. To provide examples for this shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and how this changes the user experience, Tim O'Reilly lists the following:

Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Example of Change
Content management systems	Wikis	Any user can participate in changing a wiki post
Publishing	Participating	Users can engage in conversation about a post in the comment section
Personal websites	Blogging	Microblogging services such as Twitter that provide timely and rapid information sharing services allowing other users to interact with the post

Table 1: What are Web 2.0 Examples (O'Reilly)

In their core, all of the above examples show the potential for participation by a higher number of users and rapid content creation and sharing abilities that Web 2.0 gifted to the online sphere.

Social media applications that run on Web 2.0 infrastructure show the complicated interactive relationship between content publishers and content users in an online platform. From popular cultural productions on YouTube to organizing political protests on Facebook and Twitter, “user-generated content models have offered new hope and new possibilities for public reinvolvement in affairs of common interest,” as Langlois explains (92). These sorts of

relationships are the reason why social media studies are essential because it is due to these platforms that the relationship between communicative participation through technology and democratic communication and action has been renewed and revived (Jenkins).

In addition to the connectivity and real-time features of social media, other factors are contributing to the ways in which social media could change the face of politics to the point that people can organize revolutions. The basics of any social media platform, or even the mainstream mass media, is the innate need of human beings for communication and interaction within societies. “From this perspective, communication is first and foremost a human affair, and online technologies are here to support the creation and sharing of cultural meanings” (Langlois 94). Furthermore, what the Internet and social media are offering to people is a place where individuals, groups, or organizations can have their voices heard, and they can express who they are by “exchanging meanings, representations, and information” (94) as seen in the following screenshot showing a social media user identifying themselves with the Green Movement in Iran.



Figure 2: (“Iran Election 2009”)

During the 2009 protests in Iran, one of the significant slogans on the streets was “Obama, are you with them [the regime] or us [the people]?” (*Protests in 2009 Calling Obama for Help*), and the videos of these rallies were circulating on YouTube. The videos of protestors asking for help from Western powers reached the White House, and President Obama took a stance in solidarity with Iranian protestors condemning the violence from the riot Police in Iran (Levs). These examples show how social media platforms enable people to have a voice and for an intended audience (the US in Iran’s 2009 post-election) to hear that message and get involved in the process of exchanging values and thoughts.

Social media applications are a platform for raising awareness and distributing information to other users via networked connections. Langlois takes the literal definition for “platform” when writing about social media: a stage where the speaker can disseminate a message to an audience, and the audience can engage with him/her or amongst themselves about the message. Langlois summarises the tools and features of social media platforms for political activism as the following, in addition to the core connectivity features of any communication tools.

First is the User/Network paradigms. The user-centric paradigm focuses on the question of cultural expression, and the network paradigm deals with processes of transmission. The former refers to content creation and activities of users, and the latter to the technical elements that make it possible for such activities to happen.

The second feature is transparency and hypermediacy, which refers to the presence of a medium to transfer human thoughts into cultural symbols online: for example, the ability to use buttons or pictures rather than command lines. Hypermediacy is the process of recognizing the participatory media environment on par with human users. An excellent example of this can be the

recommendation software on social sites such as Facebook that can suggest a specific advertisement according to users' online interactions.

The third factor is the production and circulation of meaning. Participatory media platforms allow for the production and distribution of meaning via cultural signs. The word “meaning” here should be understood as making sense of the world. Social media, then, allows for transferring such meanings from the real world into the cyber world. Communication, once a purely human experience, is now “constantly mediated by software as the agent not only linking the users to hardware but also to culture” (98).

The last feature is social media platforms as conduits for governance. The concept of governance is central to understanding that even though social media has helped with the “decentralization of communication online,” it does not mean that the power struggle and power relations have disappeared. However, on the contrary, the power is shifting from control over content to “the management of meaningfulness and attribution of cultural values” (99). For example, the government is the sole body to provide television and radio services for the country which has autonomous control over the management of cultural values proposed in this specific channel (Bruno), but in the case of Iranian people's protests and its depiction on social media, it is evident that the state media has less control over active social media users in the online sphere in the management of content creation and distribution of information to alter the narrative in favour of the Iranian regime.

With the explosion of information in social media, there is now the question of what “meaning” becomes more valuable, and this is in the hands of both the politicians and the public because the common feature of social media platforms is that they allow users, both politicians and the public, to not only to create content but to decide what becomes culturally meaningful and

shareable (e.g. hashtags in Twitter, share feature on Facebook, Direct Messaging and reposting on Instagram). This is one of the most powerful features of social media platforms, as anybody who can learn how to use or manipulate the systems and algorithms can disseminate their intended message better.

Taking into consideration the above features about social media platforms, one might speculate that these online tools and environments hold a degree of democracy and can be used for democratic and collective political activism. This can be partly true. However, the ability to create content and meaning without (or with lesser) censorship is only one part of this equation. What matters the most here is that, in the online world, there still exist hierarchies and roles of power which can govern the conditions in which what “meaning” can be seen/heard or not. Social media manipulation has turned into a big business. More than 48 countries are investing more than half a billion dollars in developing strategies such as disinformation campaigns and online psychological manipulation to gain influence the public users who are online in social media platforms (Bradshaw and Howard 3). Therefore, the power of social media platforms is not in the content *per se*, but it depends upon who gets to control the stream of the information: the public, the politicians, or the software companies who created this online world.

### **Iran: The Internet Profile**

After presenting the theories concerning the role of technology, the Internet, and social media in politics at its general level, it is useful to see how such findings are applicable. The Internet and social media platforms are tools in the hands of governments and public users. As the people and governments are different in each part of this world, then, Internet usage and online political activities should follow more local traditions and practices as well.



The purpose of this paper is to focus on the role of social media platforms in the recent Iranian political environment. Most notably, Iran has undergone two major events of social media political activism in the recent decade. The first one is the civil political unrest following the 2009 presidential election disputes that led to the emergence of “the Green Movement” and “The Twitter Revolution in Iran.” The second wave of participatory media civil unrest started in 2017 and is famous for the role of two specific social media applications: Telegram and Instagram. Before analyzing the role of social media in these political movements, it is vital to understand the demography of Iranian citizens and how the system of government concerning the Internet works in that country.

Iran is a country in the Middle East with a population of around 84 million people whose median age is 32 years old, and more than 75 percent of the population live in urban areas (*Iran Population (2020) - Worldometer*). Iran has a young population in a world where information technology is at its peak. In a national survey in 2018, more than 46 million in Iran have access to the Internet, which makes up 64 percent of the population (Tehran Times ). This data shows a high penetration rate for the Internet among Iranian users. Online political activity has been on a rise in Iran since 2009, and internet use data shows a growing number of participants in the online domain as well.

### **Policies and laws in regulating the Internet in Iran**

Iran underwent a significant political change in 1979 when the Islamic Revolution replaced the last monarch of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. After that, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran was adopted by a referendum held on December 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1979. The new constitution changed the system of state from a parliament-monarchy to an Islamic Republic,

vesting the sovereignty in God and the role of revelation in ruling and appointing of a Supreme Leader as the head of state.

For this brief introduction of Iran's profile regarding the Internet, it is crucial to know the legal and constitutional basis for telecommunications in Iran because broadcasting services of any form (print or internet media) is state-owned and heavily regulated and monitored by the government of Iran. The justification for such control over the access to information comes from Chapter XII, Article 175, of the constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression and thoughts as long as they align with the Islamic criteria and rules and to the best interest of the country (shoragc.ir). The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) of Iran is the executive branch of the government to provide access to the Internet for the country for both public and private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and mobile service providers that offer internet access to their users.

In addition to the ministry of ICT, the supreme leader of Iran has ordered the implementation of other offices and bodies with a transnational jurisdiction to join and gather all the stakeholders of the Internet and Information Technology in Iran. The approved general policy dated in 1993 states that the digital networks of information of any kind should adhere to the laws and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran to ensure the safety of political security, cultural and social norms, and economic practices. Moreover, the level of access to digital services should be restricted according to the purpose of use and only through the established organizations. This mandate continues: participation in the cyber world should be for the creation and dissemination of information and essential services based on Islamic thoughts and cultural values (*Expediency Discernment Council- Approved General Policy 18-08-1372 of Ettelareshani*). Access to the Internet is heavily regulated through a web of governmental and judicial offices and councils.

This approved policy paved the way for the creation of two prominent offices, which have the highest levels of control in internet surveillance of the Iranian citizens: the Iranian Cyber Police and the Supreme Council of Cyberspace.

The Cyber Police, launched in 2011, oversees criminal activities on the Internet and social media. In addition to regular crimes such as hacking, this police force actively seeks to identify political protestors who have a social media presence and it has put forth intelligence/counterintelligence operations (*Fars News Agency*) to combat social media political activism. At the national level, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace is chaired by the president. Also, it gives seats to the head of the parliament and the head of the judiciary system and ministers and military generals. The council members have the power to pass policies, which then become enforced law to control and monitor Iran's cyberspace and to efficiently monitor and supervise digital activities in Iran (*Supreme Council of Cyberspace*). These two offices, along with the rest of the network of control in Iran, have been a significant force in shutting down political activism throughout the Internet and social media platforms for Iranian citizens.

### **Events of 2009 in Iran: The Twitter Revolution and Citizen Journalism**

The presidential election in Iran back in 2009 was the steppingstone for online political activism. President Ahmadinejad claimed victory with nearly 63 percent of the votes and his opponent, MirHossein Mousavi, also claimed victory (*Both Sides Claim Victory in Presidential Election in Iran - The New York Times*), which led to political disputes and the start of protests and civil unrest called the "Green Movement," where the protestors wore green wrist and headbands representing Mr. Mousavi's campaign colour (Tait et al. n.p.). In the following days of the election, protestors used social networking platforms to document and organize the protests.

The protestors found out that technology, the Internet and social media, could be practical tools to disseminate information about organizing the protests and also to send information to the outer world about the current events of Iran. Social media networks allowed Iranian citizens to send visual and textual data to the general public and international press to reach audiences beyond Iran (*EDITORIAL: Iran's Twitter Revolution - Washington Times*). Though the Iranian government quickly started to censor the Internet and unleash police forces onto the streets to control the protests, this massive wave of participation on social media platforms went viral around the world to the point that some western media such as *Newsweek* magazine recognized the 2009 Iranian protests as the “true birthplace of citizen journalism” (Ali and Fahmy 59). The aftermath of 2009 post-election events in Iran is a prime example of gatekeeping practices by the governments to shut down the citizens’ voices.

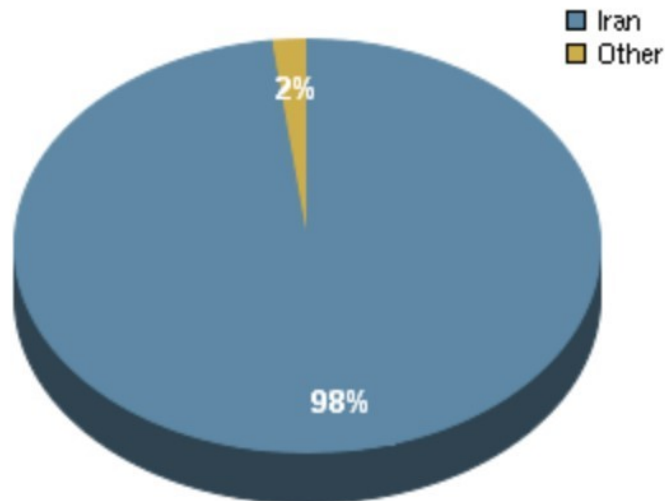
After the election day and announcement of the result, millions poured onto the streets and rallied with “Where is my vote?” as their main slogan (Debashi). The majority of the protestors were young people who were demanding reform in the current Islamic state to move to a secular state by shouting “Independence, freedom, Iranian republic” (a changed statement from the 1979 rallies against the last Shah of Pahlavi stating “Independence, freedom, Islamic Republic”) (*How Iran's Opposition Inverts Old Slogans*). Immediately after the crowds of people brought protests to the streets, the regime took radical measures to shut down means of communication in Iran, including shutting down Short Message Service (SMS), voice services, and landlines, terminating media coverage permits for foreign media agencies, arresting and jailing journalists, and gatekeeping information in state media to alter the narrative (Stern). However, a few channels remained open as the government did not realize the potential to document and organize protests as the officials of the country were unaware of communication tools on social media platforms.

With the usual sources of information blocked, Iranian citizens moved to the online sphere and social media platforms to a) gain access to news and information, b) organize protests, c) document and share information about the protests for the outer world, and d) conduct and practice information warfare (Carafano n.p.). Iranian citizens created and published their own news stories concerning the events of the protests and shared them online on websites such as Facebook and Twitter. The regime realized that protestors were still coming to the streets despite telecommunication restrictions and it found that social media was at play in these organizations. Therefore, the regime put sanctions on such websites and reduced Internet services as all the Internet traffic goes through one company in Iran, the Telecommunication Company of Iran (Black). Iranians found ingenious ways to bypass Internet restrictions by using different tools such as VPNs as mentioned above, in addition to Proxies, Anti-filtering software, and encrypted messages (Black). Regardless of bypass efforts, access to the online sphere became more difficult for Iranian protestors. Consequently, word of mouth remained the primary method of information sharing and communication for the people inside of the country, while social media became a tool for the Iranian diaspora to organize protests outside of Iran, or for tech-savvy Iranians to disseminate information online for Western media to gain access to the current event news concerning the protests (Keller). The Iranian state media holds the majority of power for content management inside the country, and it can publish content in massive numbers to influence the public. However, access to citizens' recorded data and information in online websites (PEJ News Coverage Index) gives the power to Western media and Iranian citizens to challenge the state's narrative and enter into information warfare.

The Pew Research Centre, in their June 2009 article, published a media analysis of Iran's protests to show how the information regarding the events was surfacing on the internet and social media websites (PEJ New Media Index).

### Subjects of the Most Popular Links on Twitter

PEJ New Media Index



Percent of Links the Week of June 15 – 19, 2009

Figure 3: Iran became the number 1 link on Twitter



Figure 4: Iranian protestors image mentioned in Pew's report

These popular links connected online users to a CNN story on how Iranians were using social media for mobilizing and documenting the events and to a picture of protests in Iran that sparked many user activities in the comment and reply sections on Twitter in support of Iranian protesters and their effort for freedom and democracy. From such comments, as Pew documents, a few stand out, for example, where users from all around the world wrote: “Let their voices be heard! PEACEFULLY.”

Iran’s protests in 2009 and their depiction in western media were mainly an effort by Iranian citizens documenting the events online for the world to hear their voice. Besides the organizing role of social media platforms, mostly Twitter and Facebook, it was the objective of access to uncensored information that was prominent and important during those days. As previously mentioned, in an attempt to shut down the flow of information, the Iranian government put restrictions on the Internet, such as reducing internet speed and blocking websites, and also restricting western media access to gather reports and produce news. However, one particular event led to cracking the gatekeeping efforts of the state media and the government, and that was the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan: she was killed during the protests with a single gunshot to the chest, and her death became the icon of the Iranian movement for freedom (“Behind the Photo That Captured an Iranian Woman’s Last Moments of Life”). Neda’s death sparked a series of online reactions from users on social media platforms as reported by CNN: “RIP NEDA, The World cries seeing your last breath, you didn't die in vain. We remember you,” a comment by a user from Nashville, Tennessee, or, “The final moments of her tender young life leaked into the pavement of Karegeh Street today, captured by cell phone cameras,” a comment published on Newsvine.com. Another comment says: “And not long after, took on new life, flickering across computer screens

around the world on YouTube, and even CNN.” “Neda, ojala que tu muerte no sea en vano,” one poster tweeted in Spanish. “Neda, I hope that your death is not in vain.” (*“Neda” Becomes Rallying Cry for Iranian Protests - CNN.Com*). Neda’s death became a worldwide trend on twitter with the hashtag #Neda attracting international solidarity.



Figure 5: (“Death of Neda Agha-Soltan”)

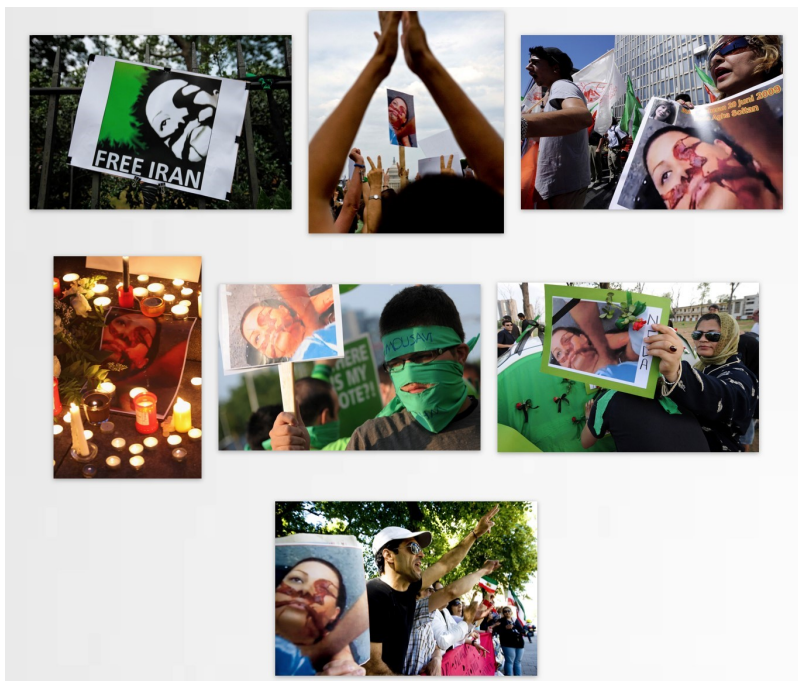


Figure 6: (“Behind the Photo That Captured an Iranian Woman’s Last Moments of Life”)



This incident circulated the Web and captured the attention of many western media and politicians, to the point that, as previously noted, Barack Obama dedicated an afternoon press conference addressing this murder, urging the Iranian government to stop using hard power on its citizens and reminding it that the world is watching the actions of the regime. On the other hand, the Iranian state media tried to dispute the story of Neda Agha-Soltan, attributing the murder to foreign agents such as the CIA, reported by the Iranian ambassador in Mexico (*Iran's Press TV Disputes Story of Neda's Death - CNN.Com*). The struggle between western media and state media in Iran in telling the stories of the Iranian protests in 2009 is an example of gatekeeping practices regarding intelligence/counterintelligence efforts. It shows the power of social media platforms and citizen journalists in facilitating revolutions by providing authentic narratives from the inside of events. As in Neda's case, the videos and pictures taken and distributed by Iranian users curbed the validity of Iran's state media narrative of the events, and Western media and other online users could access first-hand information produced by citizen journalists of Iran in order to learn the truth about the Iranian protests of 2009. When it is a time of conflict in a country, the state and the government holds the majority of the power to censor and block information (Wall). In 2009, social media provided a voice for those who could not have otherwise reached an international audience (Ali and Fahmy 66).

### **Events of 2017 to 2019 in Iran: The Telegram/Instagram Revolution**

If Twitter and Facebook were a mirror to show what was happening in Iran back in 2009, the Telegram instant messaging application and Instagram social media platform were weapons and tools for creating and fostering the 2017-9 uprisings. In 2009, social media was used to project the voice of freedom seekers in Iran to the outer audience, while in 2019, Telegram and Instagram

were tools in the hands of the protestors to organize protests and give voice to the internal audience. Iranians rank as the seventh highest Instagram users in the world. This figure shows the popularity of this social media platform, with more than 24 million active users there, according to Financial Tribune in 2018. With a population of more than 80 million, this means around 30 percent of the population is active on Instagram, the report continues. Also, Instagram had more than a billion estimated active users worldwide back in 2018 (Dhillon) who could access content on this platform from anywhere on the globe. The most popular social networking application in Iran is the messaging app called Telegram, with more than 40 million active users in Iran, almost half of the population (*Financial Tribune*).

The events of 2017 to 2019 saw the rise of Telegram and Instagram in the protests, comparing to the role of Twitter in 2009. The Telegram application hosts a variety of features that enabled Iranians have an advanced communication tool. Telegram features are, but not limited to, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calling, broadcasting channels with unlimited members, bots and polls ("Telegram (Software)"). However, the most important feature of Telegram is the privacy and security feature that encrypts users' data. Pavel Durov, the founder, has been under pressure to give access to personal user data from the Iranian and Russian governments during the protests of 2017-9 for surveillance and policing which he refused to do so for privacy reasons and because Telegram is designed in a way that the platform functions through a complicated web of decentralized companies and, therefore, defies any state regulation (Akbari and Gabdulhakov). Twitter and Facebook applications in Iran remain restricted and blocked due to the aftermath of the 2009 elections. However, Telegram and Instagram are still accessible and have wider popularity in usage amongst Iranians, as the reported numbers suggest. The Iranian regime saw the power of social media during the 2009 protests and the power which applications like

Telegram and Instagram with such large numbers of users can pose, hence offering a real danger to the regime. These two applications provide an opportunity to create and share content rapidly, and they are also a communication tool because they have instant messaging features for their respective users. As these two are more prevalent in Iran with a massive number of active users, they would pose a greater danger to the regime compared with Twitter and Facebook in 2009 if another civic unrest happens. In 2009 Iranian protesters used social media to gather “international solidarity, overwhelming feeling of affinity and kinship among global internet users and local protestors.” That is why the Iranian regime “sees them [social media applications] as a threat” (Welle).

In 2017 to 2019, the uprising facilitated through social media applications reached a greater audience and became the most prominent social and civil unrest since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The series of protests happening in 2017, 2018, and 2019 had economic roots that turned into political protests as the events unfolded. The majority of protests from 2017 to 2018 started as a retaliation against the corruption and bankruptcy of credit unions that led to the loss of many of the people’s savings. The budget cuts for providing subsidies for fuel costs were another reason for the beginning of the protests (BBC; Associated Press). In Nov 2019, the Iranian government introduced a new increased gasoline pricing of more than 200 percent overnight without any previous announcement. This action drew protestors unto the streets (Reuters). Again, just as in 2009, social media platforms became an organizing tool in the hands of protestors. However, there was a significant difference in usage this time.

As stated in the previous sections, during the 2009 post-election protests, Iranian Internet users were participating in social media to disseminate information to the western world in order to raise awareness. In the events of the protests from 2017 to 2019, Iranian users disseminated the

information mostly amongst themselves first and then for the outer audience on Instagram and Telegram. With more than 50 percent of the population as active users of these platforms, it is possible to reach a more comprehensive internal audience in order to organize a broader protest throughout the country. The numbers show that more than 21 cities were involved in the protests (*Amnesty International: Over 100 Killed in 21 Cities in Iran Protests - Iran - Haaretz.Com*), in comparison to the 2009 post-election events that mostly occurred in major cities like Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. This change in the use of social media by the protestors brought a change in the approach by the government as well.

Associated Press provides a detailed summary of the nature and events of protests in 2009 vs 2017 (Lee). First, the root of the protests was different. In 2009, the protests were a revolt against the result of the presidential election, and in 2017, the protests have economic reasons. Second, the demography of protests and protestors in the two events are different. In the earlier protests, the major cities and provinces' capitals saw crowds of people on the streets and in the events. In 2017 protests, however, more mid-sized cities and higher numbers of people in almost all provinces in Iran were joining the protests. Third, the political demands of the people in the two events have changed as well. The 2009 post-election protestors were mainly focused on rejecting the re-election of President Ahmadinejad whereas in 2017 events the people were rejecting the whole system and the regime. The next difference between the two events is the issue of leadership of the protests. In 2009, MirHossein Mousavi, a former prime minister of Iran and a prominent reformist figure, was the leader of the protests. His leadership shows that the political demands of the 2009 events were within the provisions of the Islamic Republic constitution, as the protests were tolerated by the regime at the beginning before they grew larger in numbers across the country. In 2017, however, the protests were leaderless, and they were rooted in the waves of anger of the people at the current

economic situation, resulting in a demand for a total system change. Another difference surfaces on social media use in the two events. In 2009, Twitter had been operating for three years, and Facebook was a bit older, and there were roughly a million Iranian users with access to smartphones to benefit from these tools. In 2017, the amount of smartphone ownership and Internet access had grown dramatically to constitute more than half of the country's population. Also, social media applications were more widespread and accessible, and Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp have a higher number of users in Iran, and they provide an essential secure way of communication for the protestors: encrypted messaging. With a shift in the number of active users and the type of social media platforms that people use, the Iranian regime has changed its approach on how to manage and cope with civic unrest.

From gatekeeping and counterintelligence practices in previous years, the Iranian regime took a new approach to bring tranquillity to the country. The Iranian government took a very drastic measure in Nov 2019 when the organizing of protests was getting out of hand and started to pose a severe danger to the security of the regime: a total shut down of nationwide internet access for a week ("Internet Being Restored in Iran after Week-Long Shutdown"). The shutdown began on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, amid protests against the new fuel prices, and it was massive enough to cut off Iranians from the rest of the world, as NetBlocks reports. The scope of this shutdown was not limited to Internet access alone, but included mobile and fixed-line outages as well. This was the most invasive and severe disruption in telecommunication services in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran (*How Iran's Government Shut Off the Internet | WIRED*). The Iranian protesters had no access to Internet services to share information or to organize protests, and the outer world did not have any access to see what was happening in Iran. This time, the regime was successful in silencing the revolution with policing measures and arresting the protesters, and they were able

to cut off the fueling of the revolution by disconnecting the Iranian citizens from themselves and the rest of the world.

### **Actions taken by the Iranian government to counter digital activism in 2009 and 2017-2019**

Social media can be a tool for democracy and liberating oppressed groups of people from their authoritative regimes. Unfortunately, at least in Iran's case, the infrastructure for access to telecommunication is solely provided, controlled, and monitored by the state. Hence, the regime has abundant power to control the flow of information and can manipulate or disrupt any attempts to revolution or reform taking place on participatory social media platforms.

What the Iranian regime regards as a "soft war" tool is a fight for freedom for the people on the streets. In 2009, social media was the forefront of political activism in Iran, and the US Department of State asked Twitter to hold on their scheduled maintenance and updates because of its importance during the Green Movement uprising (Pleming). The Iranian government's approach in dealing with this situation was altering the narrative (see the discussion on the Death of Neda) through gatekeeping and counterintelligence practices to either bury the protest's stream of information or providing alternative fake news of the events. What is interesting about the 2009 protests and social media is that it shows the message in the political and cultural context of Iran is as important as the medium of transmission as well. Twitter indeed gives the user the ability to send tweets in a second with just push of a button, but it is the political, cultural, and emotional factors attached to a published post or picture that are in effect to let that message induce its potential and political changes in Iran such as when the death of Neda sparked international solidarity, and she became the icon of the Green movement.

The social media sphere of political activism in the digital world has been growing fast in numbers, and when the series of uprising and protests happening between 2017 to 2019 came about,

it cast a wider net of protestors in many more cities in Iran. Niki Akhavan's study on Iran's 2009 social media activities shows that the Iranian citizens used social media to create transnational and translocal spaces to practice a plurality of voices and exchanged views that led to "the emergence of new communities of interpretation that played an important role in influencing the discourse about the election" (84). In that time, the state actors and supporters also became increasingly active on social media and the state continued "to both suppress individual citizens' use of social media and engage with this new media proactively" (85), Akhavan writes, which led in a widespread counterintelligence efforts to silence the voice of the Green Movement. Though Iranian protestors did not succeed in fulfilling their revolution in 2009, social media helped them in learning rapid information-sharing practices to circumvent state restrictions on media and achieve international solidarity.

Iran has gone through a change in digital literacy since 2009. As is seen in the data projected in previous sections, digital media users have rapidly grown to include more than half of the population as active social media users. Political figures in Iran are also actively participating in social media as well. For example, the office of the supreme leader is active on Instagram with 3.6 million followers and 6700 posts ([https://www.instagram.com/khamenei\\_ir/](https://www.instagram.com/khamenei_ir/)). Such activities show that: 1- The Iranian government has accepted the legitimacy of social media and the Internet as a tool for change, and 2- Iranian politicians and heads of state use social media to provide counterintelligence when citizens become active in the digital world against the policies of the country (Duncombe). The constant struggle between the state and social media users in Iran continues as the government tries to control this massive domain to assert authority and track down citizens' activities. However, Iranian protestors and online users have been somewhat successful in making "the real the virtual" and transmitting their message across the globe and within Iran as

well, which is why “The internet will serve as the virtual battle-ground against authoritarian rule and a march towards democratic governance” in Iran (Semati 53).

In addition to international efforts to gain access to citizens’ data, Iran is employing different layers of ICT measures to track, restrict, and control digital activism. Small Media, a London-based lab focusing on censorship, has provided the following report and snapshot on how the Iranian regime is controlling the Internet on the infrastructure and government level:

Preventative Methods	Interceptive Methods	Reactive Methods
Methods used to prevent forbidden content from reaching Iranian users in the first place.	Methods used to monitor and block forbidden content from reaching users as they access it.	Methods of censorship and control used to respond to users after they have gained access to restricted content.
<b>URL ‘blacklist’</b> When a user attempts to access blocked content, they are automatically redirected to a webpage managed by censors	<b>Deep Packet Inspection</b> Technology used to monitor, track and block internet traffic	<b>Respond to patterns in user-behaviour</b> Traffic analysis and DPI surveillance informs the creation of updated blacklists and filtered keywords
<b>DNS redirection</b> Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC) is given a list of URLs, which it blocks prior to allocating bandwidth to ISPs	<b>MITM (man-in-the-middle)</b> Method used to intercept online communications	<b>Arrest of internet activists and developers</b> The state has arrested a number of cyber-activists working against online censorship
<b>Content-control software</b> Software used by TIC to automatically inspect, filter, and block sites	<b>Traffic Analysis</b> Analysis of sites that are being viewed most frequently	<b>Periodic blocking of SSL</b> Websites with SSL security protocols are periodically blocked inside Iran, forcing users to use insecure websites instead.
<b>HTTP host and keyword filtering</b> URLs and headers containing specific text are automatically filtered by TIC		<b>Connection throttling</b> At moments of political or social tension, connection speeds are throttled to limit online engagement
<b>Broadband speed limitations</b> ICT Ministry forbids speeds faster than 128kbps for home users		

*Figure 7: (“Revolution Decoded”)*

Social media platforms have their roots in the real world. It is the real people behind the user handles who are publishing information and participating in its circulation. This high number of connections between online users to the real world people makes social media users acting as an ad hoc assemblage of people in times of political uprising by publishing and expressing their thoughts and protesting onto the streets later on (Bebawi and Bossio). The institutionalized power, the governments, changed their attitudes towards social media and learned to use them to silence the people and shut down the protests. In Iran’s case, for example, every time that hashtags and



user-generated content become a trend on social media platforms, the regime and state media produce disinformation content to shut those down (Jenkins).

When states become involved in such activities, they also provide false information to mislead, deceive, or confuse the audience purposefully. The Iranian regime is using USSR propaganda tactics to disarm its citizens in information warfare (Golovchenko and Adler-Nissen). However, the stream of information and digital activism is on the rise in Iran, and producing disinformation is not sufficient to counter digital activism on its own. Also, the Iranian diaspora abroad is growing in number, and they enjoy and benefit from the western countries' freedom to raise their voice, and the Iranian regime is taking extra steps in controlling these groups as well. For example, in 2017-8, a Telegram channel “Amad News” was responsible for sharing information about the shortcomings and corruptions of the Iranian officials on social media sites for Iranian citizens and helped with organizing protests. The administrator of Amad News was then arrested in 2019 and brought back into the country for trial for his involvement in the protests (“Iran ‘seizes Exiled Journalist’ for Fanning Unrest”). Such activities show how the Iranian regime’s agents are monitoring the exiled citizens and diaspora population who work against the regime.

Internet control and surveillance are not limited to Iran’s inside borders anymore. The Iranian regime has learned and adapted technologies to track the activists far away from mainland Iran. Some measures could be hacking to gain access to personal, private, and essential information of the opposition, or it can be counterintelligence efforts to bring back the regime’s opponents into the country in order to arrest and interrogate them. “The threat of targeted information collection through email intrusions and social media hacking enables state authorities to maintain a latent pressure over activists, even if they are no longer residing in the country” (Michaelsen 468). The Iranian regime is the sole provider of internet access gates to the ISPs in Iran. Therefore, it can

control the flow of information and even track the content of communications such as voice calls and text messages. These are some of the ways that the regime manipulates the infrastructure to access or hack citizens' information, Michaelson's report shows. For example, two-factor authentication can be easily manipulated by the Iranian government as to when an online service, such as Gmail, sends a verification code to a user's mobile number that can be read by the state's agents as well.

## **Conclusion**

Technology, computers and mobile phones can be a tool for revolution and liberating people from oppressive regimes. Technology, in its general term, connects people from all around the world and make it possible for information to circulate unless governments try to suppress the flow. The convenient communicative features for a networked group of people and the massive amount of information around the Web have helped in educating the public and raising awareness about political issues.

The number of active users grows in Iran more and more, and their social media activities become more complex than before, and the Iranian regime has started to employ a multilayered response to combat such unrest. The regime's responses range from ICT measures to disinformation campaigns and policing tactics. Totalitarian regimes like the Iranian government change their response to social media activism when the number of participants and the scope of citizens' practices change, and such governments take extreme measures to silence the voice of the protests.

Even though the Iranian protests in the 2009 Green movement or the 2017-19 protests have not yet been successful in comparison to their counterpart Arab Spring movement in the rest of the region to overthrow the dictatorship in Iran, social media participation has resulted in raising

political awareness and learning new ways to use social media platforms for content creation and sharing in order to facilitate revolutions.

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